

Popular literacy in Scandinavia about 1600 - 1900

Johansson, Egil

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Johansson, E. (1985). Popular literacy in Scandinavia about 1600 - 1900. *Historical Social Research*, 10(2), 60-64.
<https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.10.1985.2.60-64>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

POPULAR LITERACY IN SCANDINAVIA ABOUT 1600-1900

Egil Johansson(+)

Abstract: Utilizing the poetic image of the growing tree, this essay examines the old reading tradition in Sweden. By stressing the religious origin and practice of reading it corrects the misconception that literacy developed only with the industrial revolution. Although it draws on the rich quantitative Umea database, this paper takes an important step towards exploring the quality of the reading experience through close attention to popular culture and the content of the books.

I like to picture Scandinavia as an enormous tree on the map of history. The roots penetrate deeply into the livelihood and culture of the continent. The trunk marches through Denmark and southern Sweden. The enormous crown stretches high up in the east, north and west, covering land and sea. This picture need not offend anybody. It will be of great help to me as I try to piece together the development of popular literacy and education in Scandinavia during the last three or four centuries. This puzzle shows an abundance of observations and ideas. It encourages the play of thought. That is why I chose the picture of Scandinavia as a tree. It is not only the land itself which can become this image. Scandinavia's population growth, its economic political and cultural life as well as the growth of popular literacy and education can borrow the same simile.(1)

The growth in population

Certainly the growth in Scandinavia's population gives the impression of a growing tree. The number of people living in Scandinavia around the year 1600 can be assumed to have been slightly more than two million. Of these a third each lived in Denmark, Sweden and the rest of the Scandinavian countries (Finland, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, etc.) Around the year 1750 the number had increased by a million. In Denmark and Sweden the population remained nearly steady. The increase was spread over the rest of Scandinavia. At the turn of the 19th century there were around five million Scandinavians. Almost half of them lived in Sweden and roughly a fifth each in Denmark, Norway and Finland. The Danish population remained barely a million and Norway and Finland with their rapidly growing populations caught up with Denmark. During the next century these three countries grew at the same rate. They almost tripled their populations to approximately 2.5 million each by the end of the last century. During the same time, Sweden doubled its population to roughly five million. And Iceland had since the 18th century doubled its population to approximately 80,000. Greenland's population was at that time around 10,000. Thus the population, its density and growth evoke the picture of a growing tree on the map over Scandinavia, where first the trunk, then the branches and finally the whole tree flourish. The real meaning of this picture, however, is in its use for depicting the cultural and educational traditions of these peoples.

Naturally one's thoughts lead to the conditions of these people's lives and livelihood. First, the proportion of city dwellers could be of importance. A

(+) Address all communications to: Egil Johansson, Demographiska Databasen, Umea University, S-90187 Umea

fifth of the population of Denmark lived in towns and cities. The urban population was barely a tenth in the rest of Scandinavia. The difference was great. Moreover for a long time the merchants from Denmark and central Sweden dominated Scandinavia's towns and cities through privileges and mercantile rights. Copenhagen with 100,000 inhabitants and Stockholm with its 76,000 in 1800 were at that time ten times bigger than either Oslo or Helsinki. Almost all of the other towns and cities remained rather small. But even so they were set apart by a definite educational tradition. As on the continent each town had its elementary schools to some extent for the poorer children as well as separate ones for the children of the more affluent. Some cities had secondary schools and other institutions of higher learning. Therefore the development of life in the city fits the picture of an emerging tree of knowledge composed of urban school systems in the Scandinavian countries with their roots and trunk in the south and with branches spread toward the east, north and west. At least this was the case for the important educational requirements of both the authorities and the commercial and industrial life in the cities. Other aspects of industry and commerce strengthened this picture even more.

Secondly, for the rural population - about 90 percent of all Scandinavians - there was another story. Naturally the rural population remained strong where the towns and cities were weak, and vice versa. Typically it was the farmers in Denmark that lived under the most wretched conditions (not taking into consideration the fertility of the land and the farming technique) especially during *Stavnsbaandet* (some sort of partial serfdom) in the 18th century. In Norway and on Iceland the farmers were given more breathing-space under the same Danish rule. The farmers in Sweden and Finland lived perhaps more independently as they had self-government on the parish level and representation in the Swedish Parliament. But on the whole the rural population believed that for everyday use they did not need much bookish education. Sunday life was a different question! There, Scandinavia was to become a flourishing branch of the tree of the universal church.

The flowering of popular culture

The Scandinavian indigenous culture branches off in a comparable manner. In Denmark and Scania the dependence on the Continent was considerable. But further on over the Scandinavian map the indigenous cultures lived on for a long time. The age old customs were preserved with their provincial characteristics. The most noteworthy was Scandinavian popular poetry and in particular the oral and written popular literature of Iceland. A provocative question is raised in the Icelandic history of popular literacy, namely to what degree reading and writing of popular literature really was once widespread but later disappeared during the first decades after the Reformation. The question is striking, like similar problems with our understanding of the runic tradition for example in Sweden and Norway. Branches can certainly both turn green and wither on the tree of literacy and popular culture!

We can also count spoken language among the indigenous popular culture. The many dialects were mainly left to live their own life. But in certain border areas the confusion of tongues could be awkward. German speakers turning into Danish ones, Danish speakers turning into Swedish ones and Lapps turning into Norwegian speakers, are some examples of this confusion.

It was easier to control the written language. It covers all dialects. Danish became the written language even in Norway and the same was the case with Swedish in the Scanian counties. Danish and Swedish respectively became the official language in their respective political areas (Denmark,

Norway, Iceland, Greenland, etc. versus Sweden and Finland). But for popular literacy the ordinary people, the Icelanders and the Greenlanders in the Danish kingdom, the Lapps and the Finns in the Swedish, got to see their own mother tongues in print. An interesting detail with respect to this is that the popular literature was printed in Gothic script. This, at least in Sweden and Finland, revealed in a surprisingly obvious manner the range and form of both the religious and worldly popular literatures. The learned literature was however printed in the Latin alphabet and for a long time in the Latin language. But this leads us deeper into the role of politics in the map of culture.

Politics, through war and peace, has drawn its dramatic lines over the Scandinavian map. Danish land taken over by Sweden and Swedish land surrendered to Russia, resulted in noteworthy changes of a linguistic, political and cultural nature. Perhaps the ones to feel the political designs forced upon them the most were the Scanian counties, Karelia and the Norwegian Lappish province. The power of the state and the missionary work of the church were the instruments in the west, north and east in the most distant parts of the countries, e.g. Greenland, Norway, Sweden and Finland. Such border areas left characteristic results from the clash between the earlier popular culture and the demands of later times. Somewhere in the middle of this process still another pattern was at work, namely the need of popular literacy within the church.

The reading tradition of the church

It is important to treat the reading tradition of the church as something new and foreign from far-off countries. Impressions formed by reading about other people and conditions penetrated into the popular culture. The biblical images were "tuned in" as a kind of early Eurovision in Sunday texts read in all the churches. The Scandinavian people encountered a new circle of friends. Individuals, events and milieus were to become more and more familiar, not only in the nearest environs or in the local traditions but also in the biblical texts. It was thus possible for the hymnbook and parts of the bible to be something of a family album. Undoubtedly this often occurred. Like the Apostles surrounding their Word of the World, the Scandinavian peoples were taken into new circles of friends. They were to do this through the church year on Sundays, in the church and at home, during church services and family prayers, while listening, singing, praying and reading. It is impossible to understand the real role of the reading tradition of the church in Scandinavian cultural life without this work of the church and the choice of its pathways crossing all borders and entering every home. The message was to arrive at all costs - by heart or by reading, whether with knowledge and understanding or without it, a lot or a little, collectively or individually. Over the Scandinavian map its pathways branched out continually like a growing tree.

The Scandinavian contributions to popular education and mass literacy were fitted accordingly into this recurring picture of a tree of population, economic and cultural life and the life of the church on the Scandinavian map. Denmark fits well as the root and the trunk, with its more urban culture and its Continental school policies. The attempts to have teachers and schools of some kind in all Danish parishes, were mostly German inspired. The same pattern was brought to Norway. The rural school of the 1730's became the hallmark of a Danish-Norwegian school program. Within the Danish Kingdom, Iceland was, however, permitted to follow its own designs. In the immediate home environment the children were to be familiarized with the books. On Greenland both the missionary work of the Moravian Brotherhood

and Danish school politics played their part. But the people were allowed to listen to and read their mother tongue.

The educational pathways became more familiar in the Swedish kingdom as well. It is true that early attempts at schooling were numerous, for example, in the dioceses of Lund and Vasteras. For a long time, however, in the main parts of Sweden and Finland, these efforts stopped at simpler solutions. The parish clerk and "school master" might be permitted to help, but the responsibility rested more immediately with the home. The achievements were at times extremely limited. Resistance to costly school systems was great among the rural population. Reading was primarily done as spiritual exercise during the quiet of the Sabbath, not in aid of the everyday struggle. As it had no obvious practical use, naturally it should not cost anything. Requirements, therefore, remained low. The "one thing needful" for the soul was enough. Such impressions of the popular educational life fit well into a picture of a growing tree. A more developed and more formal system was on its way in the south. Denmark could demonstrate more of the "practical usefulness" of reading and writing. For the countries further north, the familiar and more informal had to be enough for a long time.

The goals, content and reading methods used by the church in its popular educational program were in the main the same everywhere in Scandinavia. They originated on the Continent. In Denmark writing and arithmetic were often included as well. In the rest of the Scandinavian countries reading and memorizing were enough. Religious books of a similar sort spread to Scandinavian homes. More than three hundred titles - mostly translations from the German and printed before 1800 - could at that time be found in the homes in Vasterbotten county in northern Sweden. Some books were included in approximately 80 per cent of all the inventories of the deceased. A comparable offering of books could also be seen in the other Scandinavian countries. Moreover, empirical reading methods, for example according to Comenius, can also be traced in the sources. Both school regulations in the south, the Registers of the Souls (churchbooks) and the Catechetical Examination Registers in the north and east, give the same information. These latter sources are themselves apparently branches on an older family tree with the roots in the communion books, *liber status animarum*, of the medieval and Catholic church and in examinations of confirmation, confession and Holy Communion.

There were, however, great differences between home instruction and teaching in the school in the kind and use of available resources. In order to handle these questions correctly in different countries the training of priests and teachers had to be surveyed as well as the ministry and the teaching profession. Teaching in the home demanded an extended ministry in Sweden and Finland. The training of a lower clergy was handled in the cathedral towns (in a "gymnasium") for a long time. In order to become a vicar one had to pass a special pastoral examination. Annual clergymen's meetings (synods) were to supply continuing teacher education. The clergyman was also named the parish "teacher". Continuous visitations by bishop and dean meant both education and control. The results have been made available to future ages by numerous Catechetical Examination Registers.

In Denmark and Norway the school programs demanded different kinds of teachers and different means of control. The Danish-speaking clergy remained university trained (as were the top clergy in the Swedish and Finnish church). They were to supervise both the studies of upper school scholars and the rural schools. Some teachers for popular education were students, others were eventually educated at teacher training colleges in the towns,

but many teachers remained fairly untrained in these attempts at schooling. The same minimum standard was set for these elementary schools as for the system of home instruction. All Scandinavians could be tested in reading at the time of confirmation, communion, marriage, or migration. In the countries where there were home visits and catechetical examinations the tests became more frequent for all ages, from the youngest to the oldest. In the Danish educational program some of the adults might have been lost. But it must be stressed that reading was not only meant for childhood. It was to be used and extended during the whole lifetime in the parish.

The basic structure of the old reading tradition remained largely common to Scandinavia. Christening and the teaching and examination of children, confirmation and Holy Communion opened the road to marriage and other social privileges. All this is recognized in each of the Scandinavian countries. The social good derived from education was built into the world of *hustavlan*, the composite picture of the roles played between the different classes and their conditions. The economic benefit was most obvious in urban life. Because of this it was often both by worldly compulsion and church discipline that the people were held to the book. The rural life and daily work did not actually demand any degree of reading ability. The social order and the law could always be maintained by worldly power. But the gospel had to be discovered in the biblical texts, which had to be heard, sung and read in the church and at home. This whole program was, however, often distorted. There was nothing but coercion and legalism. But reading could also bear its real fruit. Among "readers" in popular revival groups the texts gave to many a personal meaning.

The meaning and importance of the old reading tradition

What was the content and meaning of the old reading tradition? It should not be overrated nor misunderstood. It happened to be part of the preconditions for popular movements and democracy. But it has always had its own message. In worship and family prayers this was to be better and better known. The most precious knowledge was to be found neither in nature nor in the community of culture, but in the "Word itself". To read it with one's own eyes and understand it, was everybody's calling and right according to the Lutheran accentuation of the priesthood of every man. The reading experience was then to be put into action in one's everyday calling. This much at least must be remembered of the theology and expressed meaning of the old reading tradition. To enter into it, to read and "understand" it, is still possible. It is still alive. It is forever to be distinguished as one of the "trees of knowledge" in the Scandinavian countries. Another such tree has already spread in the schooling and reading culture of more recent times. How the two are connected is now the object of our own reading and continuing discussion.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was first published in Swedish at the XVIII Nordic historical congress in Jyväskylä, Finland, 1981, in: *Ur nordisk kulturhistoria: läskunnighet och folkbildning före folkskoleväsendet*, edited by M. Jokipii and I. Nimmela. ("Cultural History of Scandinavia: Literacy and Popular Education before the Primary School System", Jyväskylä, 1981).